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Tuesday, June 24, 2003

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EDITORIAL:

Energy bill's provision endangers Maine coast

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Maine's coastal waters and sea life are in danger because of recent federal actions that could open oil and natural gas drilling there.

A provision in the Senate's version of the massive energy bill requires a federal inventory of coastal areas that have been closed to drilling since the early 1980s. Areas like Georges Bank could be impacted by exploration and drilling if the provision survives in the final bill.

An amendment to remove the provision was voted down by the Senate this month, the latest action in sometimes controversial discussions on the sweeping energy bill.

There are obvious concerns about drilling in one of the world's best places to fish, but even the exploration itself has problems.

Studies show that the air guns used in seismic research are harmful to sea life. Australian researchers found that air guns cause extensive hearing damage to fish. Norwegian researchers found that the catch rate for some types of fish dropped dramatically for almost a week after seismic testing. Fatal whale strandings in Mexico and the Galapagos Islands were connected to similar testing.

Opening up the East and West coasts to petroleum exploration, though, has even greater consequences. There's no point in looking for gas and oil, after all, if there's no ultimate plan to extract the resources.

If oil and natural gas reserves are discovered, the potential damage



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from drilling would be insurmountable. The possibility of accidents and the catastrophic effects from even one spill should have been enough for lawmakers to kill the issue.

Some tried, including Maine Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins. The amendment that would have removed the exploration provision from the Senate's energy bill failed June 12. Both senators supported it, citing the possible damage to Maine's fisheries.

They were right to try to remove the provision. There's a good reason that Congress enacted a moratorium on ocean drilling off the California and New England coasts in the early 1980s - the prospect of spills was just too risky.

The passage of twenty years or so doesn't make the prospect of spills or the damage they could do any less real.

Damage to Maine's coastal environment means damage to Maine's economy. Exploration and drilling could disrupt and endanger one of the state's richest sources for fish, and that puts Maine's entire fishing industry at risk.

The House version of the energy bill excluded coastal oil exploration without opposition, though it does include many, many other environmental setbacks, including almost \$19 billion in subsidies for the energy industry. The Senate version contains about \$10 billion.

U.S. Reps. Tom Allen and Mike Michaud, both Maine Democrats, rightly cast votes against the bill as a whole.

It's understandable that lawmakers want to reduce America's dependence on foreign oil, and they should. The nation is in a fragile position having to depend on the Middle East - not exactly a politically stable region - for much of its crude oil. The best way to reduce our dependence on Mideastern oil is to reduce our dependence on oil, period.

One of the most intense discussions in the energy bill process was whether to include language that would open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to drilling. The House did; the Senate rightly did not.

It is not good policy to cause more damage to our natural resources for a finite supply of energy. Instead, the nation's lawmakers should work to reduce consumption of oil through legislation that requires tighter emissions controls and better technology that makes vehicles use less gas. They also should expand subsidies to aid the development of renewable energy sources like solar and wind power.



That way, the discussion about whether to explore for oil and natural gas in our coastal waters and other sensitive natural areas will be moot.

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